

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Proper 23 Year C  
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Lately, for some reason, remembrances of my time of hospital chaplaincy training keep settling on my heart and mind. Perhaps, like all experience, there is residual truth in them that can take some time to unfold, to offer something that we need to know right now. What has been surfacing in my heart this week was the hardest thing our class had to learn right up front as we began our trauma unit practicum. We had to learn not to say "It will okay" to the distraught family members as we escorted them from the emergency waiting room into the private trauma unit rooms, where they would sit and wait to meet with the doctor, long before they actually saw their loved ones, waiting often in a daze, sometimes in hysteria, and always with visual distress. Every cell in my body, every movement of my heart, every impulse in my brain urged me to clasp their hands in mine, look them squarely in the eye and say, "it's really going to be okay". But we couldn't say that, because we didn't know it to be true. Our job was to lead them into the hard reality they were about to face, and to help them to settle into the news that their lives had changed forever. We were there to hold the fragmented pieces of their family together for the moment and to open the space for God to be present to them, but we weren't there to make them feel better about what had happened or to offer false hopes of a good recovery. It was really hard to do. Often I almost felt I had to literally cover my mouth with my hand so I was prevented from uttering the words of reassurance I so desperately wanted to share. But I couldn't. I needed to tell the truth of the hardness of a situation that often would get worse, and only sometimes better.

This is the situation in which the prophet Jeremiah finds himself as he writes this letter to the exiles in Babylon, the Jewish people who were conquered in 597 BCE and taken to a foreign land, where there was no temple to worship in, where there were pagan gods to be worshiped, and where the presence of God seemed to escape them.

Jeremiah and the people of Israel had found themselves in the midst of false prophets, those, who like I, wanted only to offer words of reassurance, who wanted to tell the exiled people that "all would be okay." They promised the people would be returned to their homeland within two years and to just hang in there and life would be restored to normal. Jeremiah had a different message and this message was from God. It must have been terribly difficult to deliver this message because it wasn't what they wanted to hear. Jeremiah must have imagined their distraught faces, their visual distress, their anxiety mixed with anger, their bewilderment, their desire for life to return to what it had been before the conquest, and yet he spoke the hard truth. Jeremiah claimed that it is was the Lord God himself, YHWH, who placed them there in exile, and that they would not be returning soon, in fact they would be there for generations, and that they were to see the welfare of the Babylonians as their own, and beyond all else, they were to pray for their captors.

You can imagine the shock this must have been to a people who had written this psalm during their captivity:

By the rivers of Babylon—

there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.

<sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.

<sup>3</sup> For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

<sup>4</sup> How could we sing the LORD’s song  
in a foreign land?

<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!

<sup>6</sup> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.

<sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,  
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!”

<sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!

<sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

They could not imagine how they could sing a new song while under the captivity of Babylon, and yet that was exactly the future Jeremiah prophesized for them. That was the Lord’s will for them.

We too hit walls in our lives that the message of Jeremiah speaks to, when the hardness of life seems all-consuming, when the trauma and drama of life overwhelm us, when what we’ve worked for is destroyed, when anxiety around our job security settles around us as an icy fog settles among the evergreen trees along the coast of

Maine, when we ourselves, or our loved ones, walk into the emergency room and we're not sure what the outcome will be. There are times when we crave the reassurance of anyone who may tell us the falsehood that "all will be okay", or we push the hardness away because we don't have the energy, the courage, or the mental health to look it squarely in the eye, but Jeremiah reminds us that there is redemption in the hardness.

YHWH didn't leave the exiled people in Babylon forever. Though some chose to stay and develop a strong Jewish presence there, all were released from their bondage, to if they wished, return to Jerusalem, as different people. What God wanted the people of Israel to learn in Babylon was that their God, the only true and one God, was not contained in their temple, but was everywhere, throughout all creation. Their God, the only true and one God, was for all people, which is why Jeremiah told them to pray for their captors. Their God, YHWH, was the God of the Babylonians as well.

God, YHWH, had brought them into a hard place, not as a punishment, but as an invitation to reveal a deeper truth about the nature of the God they worshiped. The exiled Israelites were feeling abandoned, outside of their comfort zone, broken open and broken down, and God spoke to them through Jeremiah, and said, "learn something here. Settle in. Change your perspective. See the broader image of God which I am revealing to you. Then sing a new song. Come back home, but as changed people, with a heart expanded with love for all people and all of creation."

In our gospel story today, there were 10 lepers who were cured, but only one, that we know of, came back as a changed person, singing a new song, with a heart expanded for the living presence of Christ in his life. He saw within his changed life of being healed of the disease, a life offered to him of something brand new, rather than a return to what was, as the others appeared to be hungering for. There was redemption in his turning to Jesus and proclaiming the greatness of his Lord.

It can be a really hard thing to do - to lean into the hardness, to push up against the walls which are erected in our lives, whether they come through the experience of our lives' not turning out as we expect, or through an opportunity for a new way of being that seems so foreign to us, as the life in Babylon did for the Jewish people. And just as every cell in my body, every movement of my heart, every impulse in my brain was urging me to clasp their hands in mine and look them squarely in the eye and say, "it's really going to be okay", we naturally want to look for reassurance that all will be well. But Jeremiah, the true prophet of God, said to his people, and speaks to us today, "lean into the hardness. Don't push away. Embrace it. Become it. Allow God to shape it into something new.

We know how to meet this challenge by attending to the imagery of Jeremiah's letter, which reflects God's original call to him: to build and plant, to see the opportunity to create in the bleakness or dormancy of the times of our lives, we must set down roots.

As was offered this week by the brothers of The Society for St. John the Evangelist, Brother David Allen says, “The prayers that come from our hearts, and the meditations that we make, are like roots that trees send down into the earth to draw up nourishment. They are our means of spiritual nourishment that enable us to put our trust in God and share God’s love with others, bearing fruit for God.”

Set your roots in God’s love. That’s what Jeremiah asked of his people, because Jeremiah knew that God loves us through the “meanwhiles”, those times when we find ourselves where we didn’t expect, those times when the mortgage is due and we don’t know where we’ll find the money, those times when there are rumors of cutbacks or strikes, those times when we worry about our children, those times when we sit in the doctor’s office and aren’t certain what we’ll hear next, those times when our assignments are late, when we can’t show up on time, when we can’t make sense of what’s expected of us, those times when there are storms in our lives and the waters are raging around us.

Prayer anchors us. If what we plant and what we desire to build is rooted in prayer, then we can live in hope, whether that is in our personal lives or in the life of the church, whenever we are called to reimagine a different scenario, a new perspective on how to live our lives or to be a church together. When we live in hope, we experience the redemption which is always imagined for us and offered to us by our God, YHWH, the God who loves us into being.

Amen.